

# Leadership Planning <sup>and</sup> Development:

## THE HERO'S JOURNEY

Revisited

In the George Lucas movie, "Star Wars," Luke Skywalker is summoned to battle "the Dark Side" and the forces of evil. Even though he is unprepared for an adventure of such magnitude, he takes the difficult journey, confidently faces the challenges, and, with the help of "the Force" and Obi-Wan Kenobi as mentor and guide, secures a victory.

You may be asking yourself what Luke Skywalker and St. Louis County Government have in common. Here's the answer: Luke Skywalker, in Star Wars, and St. Louis County, in its leadership development planning project, took the Hero's Journey.

The Hero's Journey is a quest that organizations and individuals take after they have decided to:

- Address an issue or problem (take the journey);
- Face the challenges and obstacles presented; and finally
- Resolve the issue (secure a victory over the problem).

Wait a minute; let me make a confession. St. Louis County Government's journey into the leadership and development planning galaxy lacked much of the drama and most of the pyrotechnics of the Star Wars saga. However, the decision to venture into the vast and often confusing realm of leadership development provided challenges, opportunities, and rewards rivaling those in the Star Wars quest.

The Hero's Journey began because St. Louis County Government faced considerable erosion in its leadership ranks as a result of an aging workforce, increasing retirements, and a more diverse community. A leadership development plan was prescribed to replenish the pool of qualified individuals, thereby ensuring that the county's mission would be fulfilled and the needs of the community would continue to be met in the future.

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There is no consensus on a definition for “leadership,” and there is an even greater diversity of opinions on the appropriate focus, scope, depth, and duration of a leadership development program. Most administrators would agree, however, that the basic objective of such a program is to develop the capacity of future leaders to guide an organization to achieve its stated mission in the context of an ever-changing world.

Despite this basic agreement, organizations vary widely in their approaches to leadership development. One central difference is that some groups believe that the focus of a leadership program should be on personal development while others emphasize organizational development. The St. Louis County Government Pilot Project addresses both personal and organizational development.

### **Experiential Learning Is Crucial**

Despite their varied opinions and approaches to leadership development, everyone agrees on this point: leadership cannot be taught in the classroom. Action learning, also known as “experiential learning,” is one of the hottest approaches to leadership development today. Experiential learning is highly visible in the leadership development literature and serves as the core approach for many benchmark programs. Experiential learning gives participants an opportunity to learn by doing in a controlled setting. Learners engage in classroom activities as well as hands-on projects. The St. Louis County Government Pilot Project employs experiential learning as a core component of its leadership development program.

Although experiential learning is positioned at the head of the class, it does not have a monopoly on leadership development models. Several other approaches are important adjuncts to experiential learning. Approaches such as executive coaching, 360° feedback tools, in-basket exercises, management development seminars, and job rotations are all used to augment the experiential learning approach.

The decision to initiate a program is only one in a continuum of decisions required to begin a leadership development project. Several questions must be answered and choices made, such as:

- How much will this program cost?
- How will we pay for it?
- Who will coordinate the project?
- What is the curriculum?
- Will the training be provided internally, externally, or both?
- Who is eligible?
- Will training occur during or after normal working hours?
- What is the duration of the program?
- What are the rewards for participation?
- What commitment must the participants make?

These questions and a host of others must be answered by every organization deciding to initiate a leadership development program.

### **Core Values Are the Basis**

St. Louis County's core values served as the starting point and foundation for its leadership development initiative. These values are: integrity, excellence, innovation, valuing people, and focusing on results. Employees selected for leadership development must be committed to upholding the county's core values and to developing the necessary leadership competencies.

Department directors identified six key leadership competencies required to accomplish the county's business purposes:

- Business knowledge and skills;
- Collaboration;
- Communication;
- Customer focus;
- Managing a diverse workforce; and
- Visioning.

The county established a pilot program and will accept nominations from department directors to establish a class of approximately 30 "high performers." The employees admitted to the program will undergo a 12- to 18-month training and development process.

All program participants are required to prepare a professional development plan. The plan identifies the participant's strengths, learning opportunities, methods used for learning, and how the competencies learned will be demonstrated. Further, each participant must develop a portfolio of materials demonstrating that the competencies have been learned and have been applied in work situations. A completed portfolio is required for the participant to receive certification from the program.

### **Based on the experiential learning model, the St. Louis curriculum is divided into three key components:**

- Individual development—training is provided in areas needing improvement;
- Core curriculum—a series of courses required of all participants; and
- Group projects—hands-on, real-world projects related to the organization's needs.

### **Advisors and Coaches Provide Support**

All participants are assigned to an advisor and several coaches. All advisors and coaches are county employees who also have been nominated by their departmental directors.

- Advisors function as mentors and oversee the progress of an individual participant during the development process. Advisors also offer guidance, provide constructive feedback, monitor the training and coaching, and

assist in goal setting to ensure that the participant meets program objectives.

- Coaches have been selected for their expertise in one or more of the identified competencies. They provide instruction and guidance in their areas of expertise. Advisors will refer participants to coaches when a participant needs assistance with an assignment. Coaches also provide resources and strategies to promote the participant's development and growth.

A certificate will be awarded to participants who successfully complete the core curriculum of courses, the group project, the Professional Development Plan, and their individual portfolio.

Monitoring and evaluation to determine the effectiveness of the program and its impact on organizational goals will be based on feedback solicited from participants, supervisors, coaches, advisors, and department directors at least twice a year.

### **The Journey Must Continue**

Leadership development will not stop at the end of the Pilot Program. Graduates will be encouraged to keep their portfolios up to date and to work to ensure their skills are used in their work assignments. Continued growth and development opportunities will be afforded program graduates by having them serve as advisors, coaches, or instructors in future programs.

Organizations in the public sector may find it difficult to take the steps needed to develop their future leaders. This is evidenced by the small percentage of public sector organizations attempting the challenge. However, if the mission and goals of your organization are to be met in the future, people in mid-management positions may have to take it upon themselves to see that the challenge is met.

If you are considering taking the journey into the realm of leadership development, here are a few basics to keep in mind:

- Begin with your organization's business outcomes and purposes in mind.
- Identify the competencies required to reach your business outcomes and purposes.
- Provide guided practical training and experience on real-world projects related to your business purposes and outcomes.

Leadership development planning may not be a priority for your organization today, but it will be needed at some point in the future. When the day comes and you decide to take the journey...

**"May the Force be with you."**

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